



FROM THE DESK OF

WALTER A. BARROWS
LABOR MEMBER



U.S. RAILROAD RETIREMENT BOARD

Walter A. Barrows

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RRB Customer Service Plan Update

The U.S. Railroad Retirement Board's Customer Service Plan promotes the principles and objectives of customer-driven quality service agency-wide. The RRB's plan lays out the standards and expresses the time frames in terms of when the agency is required to make its decision to pay or deny an application for benefits. The plan states specifically the level of service that customers can expect, and an important part of the plan is a pledge to keep beneficiaries informed of how well the RRB is meeting the plan's standards. The plan is reviewed and updated periodically as the agency gains more experience with it, compares its service with the best in business and considers feedback received from its customers.

The following questions and answers provide information about the RRB's performance in the key areas of retirement applications, survivor applications, disability applications and payments, and railroad unemployment and sickness benefit applications and claims during fiscal year 2011 (October 1, 2010 – September 30, 2011). Included are the customer service performance goals the RRB set for fiscal year 2011 in its Annual Performance Plan. These goals are revised annually based on such factors as projected workloads and available resources. Also included is information on the RRB's overall performance, as measured by the timeliness index developed by the agency.

1. How does the RRB measure overall timeliness for customer service?

The RRB developed an index to measure the overall timeliness of its customer service in four benefit areas: retirement applications; survivor applications; disability applications and payments; and railroad unemployment and sickness benefit applications and claims. This composite indicator, based on a weighted average, allows for a more concise and meaningful presentation of its customer service efforts in these benefit areas.

2. How timely, overall, was the customer service provided by the RRB in fiscal year 2011, as measured by this timeliness index?

During fiscal year 2011, the overall benefit timeliness index stood at 99.2 percent. This means that the RRB provided benefit services within the time frames promised in the Customer Service Plan 99.2 percent of the time. More detailed performance information for specific benefit areas is presented in the questions and answers that follow.

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3. What standards were used by the RRB in fiscal year 2011 for processing applications for railroad retirement employee or spouse annuities and how well did it meet those standards?

Under the RRB's standards, if you filed an application for a railroad retirement employee or spouse annuity in advance, the RRB will make a decision to pay or deny the application within 35 days of the beginning date of your annuity. If you have not filed in advance, the RRB will make a decision within 60 days of the date you filed your application.

Of the cases processed during fiscal year 2011, the RRB made a decision within 35 days of their annuity beginning date on 96.20 percent of employee and 95.83 percent of spouse applicants who filed in advance. Taking these employee and spouse cases together, 96.02 percent of this group met the agency's standard for fiscal year 2011. Average processing times for employee and spouse applications were 15.7 and 11.3 days, respectively; the combined average processing time for these cases was 13.6 days.

Also, of the cases processed, the RRB made a decision within 60 days of their filing dates on 98.8 percent of employee and 97.4 percent of spouse applicants who had not filed in advance. Taken together, 97.9 percent of these cases met the agency's standard. In these cases, the average processing times for employee and spouse applications were 21.5 and 19.2 days, respectively; the combined average processing time was 20.1 days.

The RRB's goals in fiscal year 2011 were 92.75 and 96.80 percent timeliness, respectively, for those filing in advance and those not filing in advance.

4. What standards were used in the area of survivor benefits in fiscal year 2011?

Under the standards, if you filed for a railroad retirement survivor annuity and you were not already receiving benefits as a spouse, the RRB will make a decision to pay, deny, or transfer your application to the Social Security Administration within 60 days of the beginning date of your annuity or the date the application is filed (whichever is later). If you are already receiving a spouse annuity, the RRB will make a decision to pay, deny, or transfer your application for a survivor annuity to the Social Security Administration within 30 days of the first notice of the employee's death. If you filed for a lump-sum death benefit, the RRB will make a decision to pay or deny your application within 60 days of the date the application is filed.

Of the cases considered during fiscal year 2011, the RRB made a decision within 60 days of the later of the annuity beginning date or the date the application was filed in 96.3 percent of the applications for an initial survivor annuity. In cases where the survivor was already receiving a spouse annuity, a decision was made within 30 days of the first notice of the employee's death in 95.8 percent of the cases. In addition, a decision was made within 60 days of the date the application was filed in 98.35 percent of the applications for a lump-sum death benefit. The combined average processing time for all initial survivor applications and spouse to survivor conversions was 18.6 days. The average processing time for lump-sum death benefit applications was 11 days.

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The goals for fiscal year 2011 were 93.5 and 95.2 percent timeliness, respectively, for processing initial survivor applications and spouse to survivor conversions. For processing applications for lump-sum death benefits, the goal was 97.1 percent.

5. What standards were used by the RRB in fiscal year 2011 for processing applications for disability annuities under the Railroad Retirement Act?

Under the Customer Service Plan, if you filed for a disability annuity, the RRB will make a decision to pay or deny a benefit within 100 days of the date you filed your application. If it is determined that you are entitled to disability benefits, you will receive your first payment within 25 days of the date of the RRB's decision, or the earliest payment date, whichever is later.

Of the cases processed during fiscal year 2011, the RRB made a decision within 100 days of the date an application was filed on 67.5 percent of those filing for a disability annuity. The average processing time was 92.3 days. Of those entitled to disability benefits, 96 percent received their first payment within the Customer Service Plan's time frame. The average processing time was 9 days.

The agency's goals were 70 percent and 94.5 percent timeliness, respectively, for disability decisions and disability payments.

6. What were the standards for the handling of applications and claims for railroad unemployment and sickness benefits and how well did the RRB meet these standards?

Under the standards, if you filed an application for unemployment or sickness benefits, the RRB will release a claim form or a denial letter within 10 days of receiving your application. If you filed a claim for subsequent biweekly unemployment or sickness benefits, the RRB will certify a payment or release a denial letter within 10 days of the date the RRB receives your claim form.

During fiscal year 2011, 99.75 percent of unemployment benefit applications sampled for timeliness and 99.66 percent of sickness benefit applications processed met the RRB's standard. Average processing times for unemployment and sickness benefit applications were 0.5 and 2.2 days, respectively.

In addition, 99.9 percent of subsequent claims processed for unemployment and sickness benefits met the RRB's standard for fiscal year 2011. The average processing time for claims was 3.9 days.

The agency's goals for processing unemployment and sickness applications in fiscal year 2011 were 99.5 percent timely for unemployment applications and 99.2 percent timely for sickness applications. The payment or decision goal for subsequent claims was 99.8 percent timeliness.

7. How did the RRB's performance in meeting its standards in fiscal year 2011 compare to its performance in fiscal year 2010?

Fiscal year 2011 performance met or exceeded fiscal year 2010 performance in the areas of employee initial applications (not filed in advance) and spouse initial applications (whether filed in advance or not), initial survivor applications (whether or not already receiving a benefit), lump-sum death benefits, sickness benefit applications and claims, and unemployment claims.

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Average processing times in fiscal year 2011 equaled or improved fiscal year 2010 processing times in the areas of employee and spouse initial applications (whether filed in advance or not), unemployment benefit claims, and sickness benefit applications. Also, for fiscal year 2011, the agency met or exceeded all of the customer service performance goals it had set for the year in its Annual Performance Plan with the exception of disability applications.

8. Can beneficiaries provide feedback to the RRB about the service they receive?

A Customer Assessment Survey form allowing beneficiaries to evaluate the service they received and suggest how the agency can improve its service is available in every field office. Persons not satisfied with the service they received may also contact the manager of the office with which they have been dealing.

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